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ABSTRACT

People worry about dropouts because they believe that leaving high school before graduation is detrimental, both to the individual and to society. This view does not include students' view of the situation, and in order to clarify students' perceptions of at-risk factors, qualitative data on high school seniors were collected. The central question of this study was, "What has been the process in the lives of these students, as perceived by the student, which has led to being considered at risk?" To answer this question, classroom observations, interviews, information from parents and classroom teachers, journal entries, and student records were collected on 15 students. The data that emerged were classified into three areas: (1) home environment; (2) school environment; (3) other factors or concerns. Results indicate that most students felt isolated, both at home and at school. Most considered a lack of parental supervision and responsibility as a major concern, and they believed that this apathy was shared by teachers, counselors, and administrators. Most of these at-risk students felt isolated from participation in school activities, which are usually reserved for high-achieving students. A number of recommendations to remedy this sense of isolation are offered. (RJM)

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STUDENT VOICES: Students' Perceptions of Factors Placing Them at Risk of Dropping Out of School

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Abstract

If there is to be any solution to the high school dropout problem we must base our programs on the perceptions of the students. The people most affected by the problem must be given a voice when studying the dropout problem and possible solutions.

The purpose of this study was to give voice to students who are at risk of dropping out of high school. By better understanding student perceptions of at-risk factors, future dropout prevention programs may be improved.

The research question for this study was: What has been the process in the lives of these students, as perceived by the student, which has led to being considered at risk? In an effort to answer this question, qualitative data were collected from classroom observations and interviews, information from parents and other classroom teachers, journal entries and student records. Subjects for this study were a purposefully selected group of 15 12th-grade students.

The data that emerged were classified into three areas: (a) home environment, (b) school environment, and (c) other factors or concerns (individual or personal).

Student voices: Students' perceptions of factors placing them at risk of dropping out of school

The great concern for the dropout population is based on a belief that leaving high school before graduation is not only detrimental for the individual but will also have an adverse effect on society (Rumberger, 1987). High school dropouts have lower earnings than students who complete high school or college and experience a higher rate of unemployment over the course of their work careers. There is a higher rate of pregnancy among young women who drop out of high school, and they are more likely than those who complete high school to b single parents. High school dropouts are more likely to end up on welfare as a result of these factors (National Center for Education Statistics, 1993). Unless more effectiave programs for assisting this population are found, not only will the students suffer, but there will be negative consequences for our country's economic, social, and political stability (Davis & McCaul, 1990).

One of the most crucial elements in determining if programs are to be successful is identification of likely dropouts (Olsen & Edwards, 1982). Although the dropout problem will likely

never go away, educators may help reduce the incidence rate by improving our understanding of the dropout (Rumberger, 1987). Farrell, Peguero, Lindsey & White (1988) stated that it is imperative to give voice to the people most affected by the problem. Johnson (1991) said that, if we want children to believe that there is meaning and relevance in their feelings and insights, then we must listen to what they have to say.

The purpose of this study was to give voice to students who are at risk of dropping out of high school. By better understanding perceptions of at-risk factors, future dropout prevention programs may be improved.

Review of Literature

Weaknesses of present at-risk programs were pointed out. The literature reveals:

1. Most programs have been developed because of available funding rather than because of student needs. When needs were considered, however, they were general rather than specific needs of the student population in the particular school.

2. Most at-risk programs were not designed to be effectively integrated into the school's total educational program but were rather add-ons to existing programs.

3. Many programs emphasized remedial instruction with little attention directed to meeting social and emotional problems of at-risk students.

4. Research indicated that attention must be focused on the early primary grades with an emphasis on early intervention of at-risk students.

5. Programs devoted little attention to at-risk students who may have dropped out of school already.

6. There were few programs which dealt with the at-risk student's negative perception of the value of learning and receiving an education.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Research Design

The following research question was the focus of this study: What has been the process in the lives of the students, as perceived by the students, that has placed them at risk? The purpose of this study was to give voice to students who are at risk of dropping out of high school in their senior year. The research design for this study was qualitatiave, using on-site observations over time, interviews, and document analysis. The analytic technique followed an interpretative approach. This was an appropriate methodology because as Lofland and

Lofland (1984) stated, the researcher needs to become close to the students being studied in order to understand what is going on. This enabled the researcher to understand better student voices and perceptions. According to Noblit and Hare (1988), research which uses an interpretatiave approach "seeks an explanation for social or cultural events based upon the perspectives and experience of the people being studied" (p.12).

Subjects

Eight African-American males, six African-American females, and one Caucasian female were purposefully selected for this study. The students represented students enrolled in a class for students at risk of dropping out of high school. Students for this class were selected by mutual agreement of student, parents, principal, and counselor. They were selected based on several factors which place them at risk for dropping out of school such as economic disadvantage, single-parent household, previous academic failures, or behavior problems.

Data Collection

Open-ended interviews were conducted in the classroom or at a location convenient to students, parents, and teachers. Observations and document analysis, along with journal entries, were used to obtain pertinent information, and case studies

were presented. The data that emerged were classified into three categories: (a) home environment, (b) school environment, and (c) other factors and concerns.

Cross Case Conclusions

The research question first addressed the students' perceptions of their home environment. The following are the conclusions that emerged from the data.

Home Environment

Student's generally came from single-parent homes where parents did not work or worked only part-time. While three students lived with both parents, the remainder of the students lived with amother and several brothers and sisters or, a mother and a male friend. In the majority of the homes, no adult male was present.

Six of the high school students in this study had children, and one student had two children. The general attitude toward teenage pregnancy among the majority of these students was that it was acceptable. There was no stigma associated with this situation.

Students expressed the opinion that there was little parental responsibility in the home. According to these students, parents did not know what their children were doing. They felt they were responsible for themselves as far as what

they could and could not do. However, when it came to the responsibility of the children they were having while in school, they were giving their parents the responsibility for caring for and rearing them.

A lack of parenting was a primary concern among students with regard to their home environment. Students expressed concern about parents not knowing what students were doing.

School Environment

The research question next addressed the students' perceptions of their school environment and educational concerns. In this area, there was a general expression of boredom with school. They also saw the teachers, administrators, and counselors as unconcerned for the students. No one would listen to their opinions. Students were not allowed to express their opinion on subjects that would affect them directly. Rules were cited many times as an area of concern with students seeing a double standard between students and teachers.

Overall, students expressed a negative attitude toward the entire school environment and learning in general. Lack of programs addressing this problem was one of the weaknesses pointed out by Clough (1991). This seemed to follow a pattern beginning around the sixth grade. This appeared to be the time that students began having a problem academically. They also

often cited a boredom with what was being taught and the way it was being taught. Classes became boring and teachers became unconcerned the further they progressed in school. With increased difficulty through junior and senior high school years, students seemed to drop out mentally. Students began following a cycle of failure. According to Curwin (1993), this cycle of failure could be broken by giving students opportunities to help others. This would replace feelings of anger and low self-esteem with caring, concern, and feelings of self-worth.

Other Factors and Concerns

Other concerns which the students perceived as important were addressed next. Several students spoke about drugs, however, the majority did not view this as a problem. Students felt that even if drugs were being used and sold at school, this should have no effect on them or their school work. In their view, money was the reason students would sell drugs.

Several students expressed concern about getting a job due to lack of education, and they could see the connection between education and getting a good job. They expressed regret for the lack of academic achievement during their years in school. Other concerns expressed by students centered around teen pregnancy and their future.

Implications

Most at-risk students felt isolated from participation in school activities which are usually reserved for high achieving students. These are the students who need to be involved in all aspects of school in order to feel they belong.Therefore, at-risk students should be involved in decision-making processes.

Because these students expressed regret for their lack of academic achievement and boredom with school, programs need to be structured in the elementary grades to involve students in the school community. Extensive efforts to promote high educational expectations are needed also.

Lack of concern by teachers, counselors, and administrators was an area several students mentioned as being a problem in their school. Because of this concern, mentors need to work closely with these students to establish trust and demonstrate concern for their academic achievement.

Lack of parental supervision and responsibility was viewed as an area of concern by the majority of the students in this study. Resource people from the community should be brought in to work closely with and educate parents in assuming responsibility for their children. Parental workshops could be held to address both parents and students on parental

responsibilities and offer information and assistance to the students as well as the parents.

Interventions are needed earlier to work with students who are parents or parents-to-be to teach parental responsibility. Teen pregnancy and the future were also viewed with concern. Student-led discussions on pregnancy and drugs are needed to address these problems. Students who have had direct past experience could be utilized in this area. In-school workshops are also needed to direct future plans. Begin early to develop their interests not waiting until students reach high school. Community and business leaders could be utilized to speak to classes individually and the school as a whole on career opportunities for the future.

Overall, at-risk students feel isolated both at home and school. If we as educators are to stop this cycle of failure, changes must be made in our educational system and the treatment of these students. A greater effort must be exerted to reach them in their early years.

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